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ABSTRACT

College students' troubles with reading are largely explained by commodity consciousness (materialism or the search for the fast fix) and contextual confusion (approaching a book as though it were television). The challenge for teachers of reading is to make it a human endeavor. For many students reading is an operation done to extract data from the page; it is not an experience. Approaching a book as if it were a television set, these students expect to be able to understand the contents exactly. Teachers encourage these attitudes by selling "right answers"--the one way to interpret a text. Though television seems the enemy of reading, it creates two things which teachers of reading should try to replicate for their students: a sense of identification and a sense of community. This can be done by encouraging students to listen and respond to the speaker in the text and by forming small autonomous discussion groups which are encouraged to come up with differing interpretations of the text. To encourage self-involving reading teachers must create a context which makes such involvement worthwhile, not just for grades but for social interaction and personal growth as well. (MHC)

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Self-Involving Reading in a High-Tech Culture

In the brief space that follows I will discuss, very generally, two problems that account in great part, it seems, for the troubles college students have with reading: commodity consciousness and contextual confusion. Commodity consciousness is my term for materialism, specifically the materialism that encourages everyone in this society to seek the fast fix or the easy answer. When, for instance, nearly everything in their lives is easily accessible, or at least seems so, why should students attempt something so inaccessible as reading, especially when many believe, as one student told me, that "whatever's in a book is also on TV." Just poke the remote control and there you have it. Most students, in other words, embrace what Dr. Frank Smith calls the information theory of reading. They see reading not as an experience, but an operation, specifically a matter of extracting from the text the load of data or facts packed into the page. Reading an essay, then, is like studying math. There's no reason to deal with the book if you can get the information from the teacher. Indeed, many students seem to feel that if there were enough teachers to go around, we wouldn't need books at all.

One practice that encourages students to think this way is the teacher's habit of selling "right" answers in the

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classroom. When teachers tell their students that this or that is the one and only answer or interpretation or way to read a text, they are perpetuating the notion of reading as information extraction. The teacher's interpretation or opinion becomes a fact that students store in their notebooks and withdraw when needed. In the end, the teacher-given answer is no more than a commodity that students trade for good grades. Multiple choice tests and text book reading questions whose answers are found in the teacher's manual are further proof to students that reading is no more than a hunt for the "right" information. This is why the class often responds with silence when the teacher asks a question about the reading. Students know that if they hold out long enough, the teacher will eventually surrender the coveted "answer." The students are right. Teachers do surrender.

This has happened to me more times than I care to admit, because silence compels me to be a teacher, to tell the unknowing something I know. The problem with this practice is that the teacher is doing the work the students should be doing for themselves. It's like teaching someone to ride a bicycle by riding yourself. Unless the learner gets on the cycle and tries it herself, she will only continue watching how it's done, content to let teacher pedal circles around her. In other words, why do the reading when the teacher's doing it for you? To reply, I'll paraphrase an old saw: "Give students an answer and you feed them for a day. Help students find answers for themselves and you

feed them for life." Most teachers, I suppose, would find this an admirable sentiment, but helping students find answers for themselves is a much more difficult and much scarier proposition than simply helping students with our own answers. Difficult because there is no sure-fire way to make it work, since every class, not to mention every student, is different. Scary because it demands that we act more as facilitators than as teachers, withholding our authoritative and seemingly definitive "answers." Before I discuss my classroom practice, on which these observations are based and which I hope encourages students to become self-involved readers, I must first explain what I mean by contextual confusion, the other student problem I mentioned.

Many, or most, college freshmen, it seems, approach books the way they approach TV: just as they turn on the set and start watching, so do they open to page one and start "reading." In both cases they anticipate only the transmission of information and, consequently, they act only as passive receivers. Although such passivity is effective while watching TV, it is wholly frustrating while "watching" a book, for a book "works" only when the reader does. Indeed, a successful reading is in many ways the result of the reader's and the writer's collaborative effort to make things happen. That nothing happens when most freshmen read is not their fault. The blame, if we must place it, lies in our high-tech culture and the commodity consciousness it nurtures.

Commodity consciousness, as I've implied, puts a premium on fast access to information. Solely product-oriented, it allows no time for fumbling with any ambiguities or interpretations that arise in the process of production. Time is money, after all, and information solves the problems that waste time. To make life as easy as possible, then, especially life in the market place, commodity consciousness strives to move linearly, from point A to point B, with no detours and no delays. It strives, in other words, to make this a what-you-see-is-what-you-get world, replacing words with pictures. And so, whereas America was once becoming a text-bound society, it is now becoming sign-bound. Easily decodable signs have replaced not-so-easily interpretable texts. A very simple example is the changeover from written to pictorial road signs or the move from cash registers that once demanded a skilled operator to those with pictures on their keys, demanding minimal decision-making and allowing virtually no operator doubt or interpretation. A more interesting example is the increasing number of TV ads that have replaced words with flash-card images. Watching such commercials is like watching rock videos--they're all sound and action and very little, if any, verbal articulation. The pictures themselves are the narrative. This raises the question of differences between pictures as text and words as text, an issue too complicated to deal with here. Suffice it to say, however, that these commercials represent very well the kind of product commodity consciousness strives

for: communication as sign-painting, a medium that offers the fastest fix of information with the least amount of interpretive interference.

It is no wonder, then, that upon opening a book, many students believe they will, or should, be able to understand exactly what they see, much as they understand that a red light at an intersection means "stop," or the digital display of a clock radio tells the time. This is an example of contextual confusion. It occurs because students don't know what to do with books; they have no context in which to fit reading, so they use the nearest accessible context, TV-watching, which is for many of them the most literate activity they partake of. In fact, TV-watching is akin to story-listening, an activity I assume most teachers enjoyed as children, before and well after they learned to read. The problem is, TV's visual element subverts the cognitive functions that simple listening stimulates, and so, upon coming to a text, TV-watching students are wholly inexperienced and unexercised in the ability to activate the imaginative internal eye that is every reader's best friend. What these TV-watchers are seeking in books is the visual, concrete signs that point out the information. What they find is only frustration and, almost always, boredom. "The reading doesn't do anything for me," one student complained to me recently. "I don't get anything out of it," another said.

Though TV, the apparent embodiment of commodity consciousness, seems the enemy of reading, there are two things

it creates for its audience that we teachers of reading should attempt to create for our students: a sense of community and a sense of indentification. By "indentification" I mean that there is always someone on TV addressing the viewer, whether the speaker is in a commercial or in the program itself. Consequently, the viewer is continually encouraged to feel a part of things and respond to the proceedings. This does not happen when our students open a book, however, even though every text embodies a human voice. The problem is that some speakers in texts are less friendly than others. I refer specifically to speakers who take all life from their voices in order to sound authoritative. Unfortunately, these speakers inhabit most text books used in schools, and so, by the time students come to us in college, they have had little opportunity to hear speakers in texts, which explains in great part why they have found reading such a bore. Indeed, when talking about reading, these students invariably refer to "the book" or "the article" because in their experience they have neither heard nor seen anything human in texts.

The first thing I do, then, is encourage my students to listen and respond to the speaker in the text, making sure I offer them texts that do indeed feature strong speakers. What can you tell about the speaker? I ask them. Is she happy? sad? angry? humorous? Can you find words or sentences or thoughts in the text that reveal what kind of voice the speaker has? Acknowledgment of the writer's voice is their first step towards self-involving reading, for it recognizes

the human investment in texts and encourages readers to participate in a kind of conversation with the writer. Consequently, reading begins to seem a humane or human endeavor. To underscore the notion of conversation, I encourage them to underline words, sentences, or thoughts they find interesting; to circle words they find troublesome; and, most important, to write responses in the margins of the text as they read, whether the response is simply an exclamation mark or a lengthy comment. This kind of reader response not only counteracts students' TV-watching passivity; it also makes reading more interesting because it gets the reader involved in the process of making sense. My students, I think, work at making sense of the texts we read not primarily because they want to become better readers, but because they want to talk about the reading with their peers. This brings me to the second advantage TV offers its viewers, and something I hope we can offer our readers: a sense of community.

TV puts a lot of stress on the fact that the viewer is not alone--it offers viewers not only the company of its actors and hosts, but also the company of other viewers, to whom TV is constantly making reference. In other words, TV is an eminently comfortable medium because it is so thoroughly public, while books are eminently uncomfortable because they are so thoroughly private: TV is instant companionship, reading is instant isolation. Or so it seems to our students. The reader's recognition of the speaker in the text may help make reading a warmer and less alienating undertaking, but

this alone is not enough. What students need is as comfortable a support group for reading as they have for TV. They have no reader "programs" to share among themselves, for example, no weekly Reader's Guide to consult, and no local, regional, or national fan clubs for the texts we would have them read. Our challenge, then, is to create a meaningful context for reading--a supportive readerly community--for a sense of sharing will engender a sense of purpose.

I attempt to create a readerly community for my students by forming small in-class groups, of about five students each, that discuss and explore texts common to the class. The idea is to make reading a collaborative effort among the students themselves. The shared experience of the small groups reinforces the notion that these readers are not alone in their efforts to make sense of the very alien world of reading. It also offers them an opportunity to voice and test their opinions and reactions without fear of penalty or embarrassment, for every group is autonomous--I do not sit with them, nor do I hover nearby unless invited to. What is more, the small groups get first dibs on every discussion. That is, they almost always have the opportunity to talk about the reading before we discuss it as a class. Whether I give each small group a specific objective or all groups some general questions, every group usually has a sense of mission because they are responsible for coming up with their own answers. They can't turn to me for the one-and-only interpretation, because I don't have it. In fact, I encourage differing

interpretations. And I won't lecture them on what answers I do have, for reasons I have already stated. Warmed up by the small group discussions and supported by their group members, most students usually have something to say. My job is to act as prompter, summarizer, and secretary, writing on the board the points raised in the discussion. Generally, the only restriction I place on interpretations is that the students support it with examples from the text, something most of them are not used to. This means that I often hear things I believe are way off the mark, but I remind myself that my first goal as teacher is to get students interested not only in reading but in talking and thinking about reading. They won't do this unless they are allowed to make a personal investment in determining what the reading means.

I should mention here that my class begins their reading with professional writing and then moves on to their own writing in workshops. I start with outside writing for three reasons: 1) it gives students practice trying out their response strategies before approaching each other's writing; 2) it exposes them to new and different kinds of writing; and 3) it introduces them to many kinds of texts they have never seen. This last point, I fear, has been often overlooked by our profession. Students need no more exposure to school texts. They're sick of them. What is more, school texts are anomalies in the world of books because they are heavily freighted with teacherly directives and don't truly prepare students for what they will encounter

in the "real" world. Many students, for example, do not read magazines because they simply don't know what to do with them. They don't know that magazines have tables of contents. They don't know that magazines have a certain organization (with regular columns at the front and back and feature articles in the middle, for instance). A surprising number of students have no idea that several texts may share a single page. Consequently, they will try reading each column from top to bottom, no matter what else shares the column space, such as a poem or another article. Unable to deal with the alien environment of a magazine, not to mention the alien task of reading, some students fix their attention solely on the pictures in an effort to figure out the "story."

As I have tried to suggest, such problems arise in great part from a growing intellectual materialism (commodity consciousness), which encourages them to search only for the most easily accessible "information"; and a great lack of experience, which leads them to approach texts as they would approach pictures (contextual confusion). It is unfortunate, to say the least, that the burden of attempting to ameliorate such problems must fall ultimately on teachers and educators. How can an instructor make college-level readers out of students whose high-tech culture makes it convenient to do everything but read? Reading can't compete with TV, for example. It's just not fast enough. Nor is it easy. Nor is it improvable. Reading nowadays is pretty much the way it was in the "dark" ages

because, like conversing, it is a quintessentially human activity. The challenge for us who would have our students read is to show them just how human reading is. We can start doing this, I think, by giving a great deal of class time to small group discussions, in order to nurture a sense of community, a place where both the reading and the reader matter; and by encouraging students to listen and respond to the speaker in the text. In other words, to encourage self-involving reading, we must create a context that makes such involvement worthwhile not simply in terms of grades but in terms of social interaction and personal growth.